

U.S. NONPROVISIONAL PATENT APPLICATION

STORAGE CONTAINER RENTAL SYSTEM AND METHOD THEREOF

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Technical Field

[0001] The present invention relates to a system for storage containers and more particularly to the method of renting and distributing reusable storage containers.

Background Of The Invention

[0002] Storage containers have been in existence for a while. These devices allow someone to store items in a remote or on-site location until the items are again needed. At such time, the customer may retrieve items from the storage containers.

[0003] For instance, someone planning a big or small move to a new city or just looking for more storage space after a bout of spring cleaning may enlist the services of a moving company that will sell them corrugated packaging (cardboard boxes) to temporarily store their items. The customer's will typically go to the moving company or a self-storage facility to purchase the corrugated packing materials and tote them to their home for packing.

[0004] Currently, corrugated storage containers (cardboard boxes) are sold by moving-related facilities such as U-HAUL® and STORE 'N' LOCKS®. The cost to customers to obtain the corrugated packing materials can be substantial.

Summary Of The Invention

[0005] One aspect of the present invention relates to a method for distributing reusable storage containers. The method includes obtaining a plurality of reusable storage containers. Each reusable storage container comprises a bottom, side walls, a cover movable from an open position such that articles may be placed and removed from the reusable storage container, and a closed position in which the reusable storage container is closed. One or more reusable storage containers are offered for rent to customers for a period of time. A customer accepts an offer to rent one or more reusable storage containers for a period of time. A deposit is received for the reusable storage containers accepted by the customer. The customer takes possession of the one or more reusable storage containers for a period of time. The customer returns the one or more reusable storage containers. Payment from the customer is received based on the length of time the customer possessed the one or more reusable storage containers.

[0006] Another aspect of the invention relates to a distribution system for reusable storage containers. The system includes a plurality of reusable storage containers and customers having a desire to obtain a plurality of reusable storage containers. An owner controls the plurality of reusable storage containers while one or more fulfillment centers each possess at least a portion of the reusable storage containers. One or more outlets offer at least one of the reusable storage containers for rental to customers for a period of time.

[0007] Still another aspect of the invention relates to another method for distributing reusable storage containers. The method includes obtaining a plurality of reusable storage containers.

Each reusable storage container comprises a bottom, side walls, a cover movable from an open position such that articles may be placed and removed from the reusable storage container, and a closed position in which the reusable storage container is closed. Each reusable storage container is constructed primarily from plastic. A plurality of reusable storage containers is distributed to one or more fulfillment centers. One or more outlets offers for rent to customers one or more of the reusable storage containers for a period of time. A customer accepts an offer to rent one or more reusable storage containers for a period of time. A deposit is received for the reusable storage containers accepted by the customer, wherein the deposit comprises a down payment. One or more of the reusable storage containers is delivered to the customer for a period of time. The customer returns the one or more reusable storage containers. Payment from the customer is received based on the length of time the customer possessed the one or more reusable storage containers. The rental basis is month to month.

[0008] Yet another aspect of the invention relates to another method for distributing reusable storage containers. The method includes obtaining a plurality of reusable storage containers. Each reusable storage container comprises a bottom, side walls, a cover movable from an open position such that articles may be placed and removed from the reusable storage container, and a closed position in which the reusable storage container is closed. One or more reusable storage containers are offered for sale to customers. This offer for sale includes an offer to purchase one or more of the reusable storage containers back from the customer at a later time. A customer accepts the offer for sale of one or more reusable storage containers. Payment is

received for the reusable storage containers accepted by the customer. The customer takes possession of the one or more reusable storage containers.

[0009] Still other examples, features, aspects, embodiments, and advantages of the invention will become apparent to those skilled in the art from the following description, which is by way of illustration, one of the best modes contemplated for carrying out the invention. As will be realized, the invention is capable of other different and obvious aspects, all without departing from the invention. Accordingly, the drawings and descriptions should be regarded as illustrative in nature and not restrictive.

Brief Description Of The Drawings

[0010] The drawing and detailed description which follow are intended to be merely illustrative and are not intended to limit the scope of the invention as set forth in the appended claims.

[0011] FIG. 1 is an oblique view of one embodiment of a reusable storage container of the present invention.

[0012] FIG. 2 is a schematic representation of an example of a reusable storage container distribution and rental system of the present invention.

[0013] FIG. 3 and FIG. 4 are block diagrams of a representative arrangement of an example of a reusable storage container method.

Detailed Description of Embodiments of the Invention

[0014] A system and method allows an individual customer to rent or optionally purchase one or more reusable storage containers located at various outlets.

[0015] It will be understood that any type of reusable storage container may be utilized that can be used to store a variety of different articles. For example, the containers may be used to store items such as china, dishes, video cassette tapes, compact discs, DVDs, jewelry, clothing, books, paper, furniture, small appliances, or the like. Indeed, the type and variety of articles is virtually unlimited.

[0016] FIG. 1 illustrates one example of a reusable storage container (10). As shown in this example, the reusable storage container (10) comprises a bottom (12), side walls (14), and a cover (16). The bottom (12) in this example is rectangular, however a variety of other shapes may also be employed, including, but not limited to, circular, triangular, square, polyhedral, or the like. The overall shape of the reusable storage container (10) may vary according to the specific needs of the customer, and the containers are available in a cube shape, tetrahedron, octahedron, or any other polyhedronic shape.

[0017] The containers may also be available in a variety of different shapes and sizes. For example, in one embodiment, rectangular-shaped reusable storage containers (10) are available in sizes small (approximately 22 x 16 x 12.5 inches), medium (approximately 24 x 20 x 12.5 inches), and large (approximately 24 x 24 x 24 inches).

[0018] The reusable storage container (10) of this example is made of a commercial grade plastic material such as a polypropylene, polyethylene, fiberglass, wood pulp, resins, plastic compositions, or the like. Without limitation and by way of example, other

suitable materials include metal, wood, cardboard, and the like. Examples of commercial grade plastic materials available for construction of the reusable storage container include but are not limited to those specified above. The containers may be water resistant, such that the contents are protected from water seeping in and damaging the contents or damaging the container. Additionally, the bottom (12), side walls (14), and cover (16) may be fireproof or have UV-protectant characteristics.

- [0019] One advantage of a reusable storage container (10) is that it is environmentally friendly because of the reusable nature. Further, such containers (10) may be recyclable when their useful life is over as a storage device.
- [0020] In another variation, the reusable storage containers (10) are available in various colors, hues and degrees of transparency. This will allow for coordinated storage and/or easy identification of particular articles in the reusable storage containers (10). For example, financial documents may be stored in green colored containers; and china or dishes in a container displaying a bright shade of yellow. In addition, a transparent or semi-transparent wall (14) or cover (16) allows one to view the contents without having to open the container (10).
- [0021] The reusable containers (10) optionally have removable, adjustable identification (ID) cards or tags (11) attachable to the side wall (14) or cover (16) of the reusable storage container (10). These identification means (11) will provide for easy identification of the contents of the containers and the labels are designed for simple change as new items are inserted into the container. The containers (10) may also have serial numbers or bar codes attached for simplified tracking.

[0022] In the present example, the cover (16) of the reusable storage container (10) is hingedly attached; however, snap-on lids are also contemplated. Optionally, this lid (16) is designed to allow the containers (10) to be stacked on top of one another with the lower container lid holding in place the container on top of it. The reusable storage container covers (16) may be made of the same or different material than the side wall(s) (14) and bottom (12).

[0023] Optionally, the reusable storage container (10) may be lockable with a pad lock or with plastic tie wraps (18). The tie wraps are contemplated as included in the rental agreement, for instance, as a one-time purchase.

[0024] While the foregoing are given as examples of certain options and customer specific choices for the reusable storage containers (10), it will be understood that other colors, materials and sizes are available according to the particular storage needs of the customer (28). It will further be understood that other types of materials are contemplated where advantageous performance may be varied from the foregoing teaching.

[0025] As schematically shown in FIG. 2, an embodiment of the present invention utilizes a manufacturer (22), an owner (24), a fulfillment center (25), and outlets (26), interacting with customers (28) seeking to obtain reusable storage containers (10) for a period of time. The customer (28) may be an individual renting in their personal capacity or as part of a business or organization. The customer (28) that is interested in obtaining one or more of the reusable storage containers (10) may contact the owner directly, via the telephone (for example, with a toll free number), by facsimile, or over the Internet (World Wide Web). Alternatively, the customer (28) may go to a

fulfillment center (25), or an authorized outlet (26) and place an order, as described below in detail.

[0026] The method optionally begins with the manufacturer (22) producing reusable storage containers (10) and the owner (24) initially taking title to and/or control of a plurality of the reusable storage containers (10) from the manufacturer (22). It should be recognized, however, that the owner (24) may or may not take physical possession of the reusable storage containers (10) during the process of gaining control of the containers. It should be further recognized that the manufacturer (22) and the owner (24) could be one in the same.

[0027] The owner will then contract with a number of fulfillment centers (25) (optionally two to four) strategically located in different areas of a city. As a part of the contract, the owner (24) arranges for a monthly fee to be paid to the centers (25) for allowing owner's customers (28) to drop off and pick up containers (10) at the fulfillment centers (25). Optimally, the location of the fulfillment centers (25) will mean that ninety (90) percent of the population of the suburbs of a city will not be required to drive more than ten to fifteen minutes travel time to the drop off and pick up points, or fulfillment centers (25).

[0028] The fulfillment center (25) then receives a portion of the owner's (24) reusable storage containers (10). Typically, the portion of the plurality of reusable storage containers (10) are displayed in designated areas within the center (25) so as to make them visually open and available to all customers (28) in the fulfillment center (25). At each location, a place for entering into the transaction will be designated. In the context of this invention, the fulfillment centers (25) may be, but are not limited to U-HAUL® or STORE 'N' LOCKS® type facilities.

[0029] The benefit to the fulfillment center (25) is not only the monetary compensation for the service they provide to the owner (24), but also the increased traffic from new container rental customers (28) should enhance the utilization of their traditional facilities and services.

[0030] In conjunction with the fulfillment center (25), the present invention optionally utilizes authorized distributors or outlets (26) in its method. These outlets (26) are provided to customers (28) in myriad strategically chosen physical locations throughout a given town. Examples of authorized outlets (26) include, but are not limited to grocery stores, hardware stores, convenience stores, gas stations, shipping facilities, truck rental facilities, self storage facilities, apartment complexes, office complexes, and the like. The outlets (26), which may operate as separate entities from the fulfillment centers (25), or be one in the same, interact primarily with the fulfillment centers (25) as a primary source for the customers (28) to enter into the rental contracts with the owner.

[0031] Each of the authorized outlets (26) is organized and operates in a manner that allows them to be capable of offering for rent to customers one or more of the reusable storage containers (10) for a period of time, receiving a deposit for the reusable storage containers (10), and receiving rental payments from the customer (28).

[0032] The customer (28) fills out, and the authorized outlet (26) accepts an order form, then faxes, calls or e-mails the order to the owner (24) so that the rental arrangements may be formalized. The outlet (26) gives the customer a copy of the order which reserves for the customer (28) the quantity of storage containers (10) on their order. This also establishes a

mutually satisfactory date. The owner (24) then notifies the fulfillment center (25) that a customer will be by to pick up an order on the agreed date.

[0033] If a customer (28) who has placed an order with an outlet (26) goes to the fulfillment center (25) for pickup on the scheduled day and the order cannot be filled, the customer (28) gets free delivery and pick up service by the owner (24), in addition to monetary type compensation (for example coupons) to apply to their order. While the authorized outlet (26) would not typically have inventory (10), it is possible for special arrangements to be made to have any authorized outlet (26) become a fulfillment center (25), if desired.

[0034] The block of steps (31-52) of FIG. 3, show the representative steps that occur with different embodiments of a method to rent and distribute storage containers, none of which are mutually exclusive of the other. The process optionally begins at step (31), when the owner (24) takes possession of a plurality of reusable storage containers (10) from the manufacturer (22). The owner (24), as shown in step (32), delivers a portion of the plurality of reusable storage containers to the fulfillment centers (25). During step (41), the fulfillment center (25) receives possession of the containers (10) and the owner (24) contracts with each fulfillment center (25) and arranges for a monthly fee to be paid by the owner (24) to the centers (25) for allowing owner's customers (28) to drop off and pick up containers (10) at the fulfillment centers (25).

[0035] The contract with the centers (25) provides that the owner (24) will pay a per transaction fee to the fulfillment center (25) for each order dropped off and picked up by the customer (28). At the conclusion of all transactions, the fulfillment center (25)

collects full payment plus a deposit from the customer (28), which is picked up by owner (24) on a regular basis.

[0036] Further optionally, the fulfillment center (25) may rent the reusable storage containers (10) directly to customers (28), as shown in step (42), that come directly to their facility to place an order, rather than through the owner (24) or outlets (26). Additionally, the fulfillment center (25) may advertise and sell “delivered containers” (10), which the owner (24) will actually deliver to the customer (28) at their home, office, or other desired location. In this instance, the fulfillment center (25) will receive the same amount of compensation from the owner as an authorized outlet (26) would receive (described in detail below), plus the transaction fee for the direct sale, as shown in (step 44). Here, the delivery person would collect the balance of the rental as well as the deposit (step 43).

[0037] Alternatively, as depicted in step (52), a customer (28) has the option of taking the desired quantity of the reusable storage containers (10) with them following the culmination of the rental agreement transaction with the fulfillment center (25).

[0038] An embodiment of the present invention contemplates that each of the authorized outlets (26) is organized and operates in a manner that allows them to be capable of offering for rent (step 42) to customers one or more of the reusable storage containers for a period of time, receiving a deposit (step 43) for the reusable storage containers which were accepted by the customer, (at step 51), and receiving rental payments from the customer (step 44).

[0039] As detailed in step (46), the monthly fee (or commission) the fulfillment center (25) receives, covers their service and operating costs as a fulfillment center (25).

[0040] Delivery of the reusable storage containers (10) may occur via the owner (24) after this contact with the authorized outlets (26), for those customers (28) who prefer to have the containers (10) delivered to them (and picked up when they are finished unpacking them). If this option is chosen, the customer (28) will pay (and the owner (24) receive) a fee payment for the delivery. Additionally, a pickup fee paid to the owner (24) is contemplated, for the customer (28) that would like for the packed and filled reusable storage containers (10) to be picked up from their location and taken to the final storage location.

[0041] The blocks of steps (46 and 33) are examples of the payments by the outlet (26) to the owner (28). These payments (46) are applicable for a fixed fee per reusable storage container (10), or alternatively for a percentage of the revenue received, or it may be based on a viable percentage of the volume of rental business transacted.

[0042] Generally speaking, and as shown at step (44), the payment received from the customer (28) is based on month to month rental arrangement rates. These rates may be reduced for the customer (28) when they maintain subsequent month rentals, as incentive for loyal longer-term customers (28). As shown at step (45), it is contemplated that the monthly rental rate could drop by a percentage of the original (for instance to a rate that is 25%, or 33% or 50% lower) following the first month, for these longer-term rental arrangements.

[0043] The payment received from the individual customer (at step 44) is based on a minimum number of reusable storage containers (10) rented per month and a specific initial minimum monthly rate. Further, the payment received (step 44) is based on a per reusable storage container rental rate. Yet further, the

customers (28) may be able to apply a certain amount of their rental to a purchase price should they decided they would rather own the containers (10) while they have them.

[0044] It will be understood that the deposit (of step 43) received from the customer (28) is a type of "refundable security deposit" and may, but is not limited to being in the form of commercial paper (such as an un-deposited check), or the retention of valid credit card information from the customer (28). The purpose of the deposit (step 43) is to cover any expenses at the end of the rental arrangement period regarding damages, late payments, or the like.

[0045] As discussed earlier, an optional first step in the system and method of the present invention is for the customer to contact the owner of Boxes-4-Rent (24). This contact may be made via the telephone or an in-person visit. It should be again noted that the customer (28) can optionally stop directly at one of the outlets (26) or fulfillment centers (25). If the customer desires to set up a rental relationship via telephone, they will simply call the phone number provided in the customer yellow pages, or listed on the owner's web page on the Internet.

[0046] Further, for customers (28) that want to move out of town and return the containers in another city, arrangements can be made through a delivery service to pick up the order (if there are not already fulfillment centers (25) or authorized outlets (26) in the new location). These customers may be required to rent the reusable storage containers (10) for a minimum number of months or for a minimum rental dollar amount.

[0047] One with ordinary skill in the art will readily recognize that the steps of FIG.3 (31-52) may be performed sequentially or non-

sequentially. Furthermore, the steps may be performed practically all at once or piecemeal.

[0048] The containers may be sold rather than rented. Alternatively, customers may be given the option of renting or purchasing the containers. In either case, the containers may be offered for sale, wherein the offer for sale can be coupled with an offer to purchase the container or containers back from the customer at a later time (a buy-back option). The price at which the seller will purchase the container or containers back from the customer may be set at the time of the sale of the container or containers to the customer. Alternatively, the price at which the seller will purchase the container or containers back from the customer may be set at a later date. Any suitable means or timing of calculating the price at which the seller will purchase the container or containers back from the customer is appropriate. After or upon accepting the offer for sale, the customer will pay the purchase price of the container or containers to the seller. The seller will receive the payment and the customer will take possession of the container or containers that the customer purchased.

[0049] Where a container or containers has or have been sold to a customer, the customer may later choose to exercise the customer's buy-back option to have the seller purchase the container or container back from the customer for whatever reason. At such a point, the customer may return one or more of the reusable storage containers in the customer's possession to the seller. The seller will then, pursuant to the offer to re-purchase the container or containers that was included in the offer for sale, pay the customer whatever price was or is determined for the re-purchase.

[0050] It will be further understood that the rental and distribution steps of the present invention may be performed in the specified manner or in a similar manner of non-specific order.

[0051] It is evident that many alternatives, modifications, and variations of the present invention will be apparent to those skilled in the art in light of the foregoing teachings. Accordingly, the invention is intended to embrace all such alternatives, modifications and variations as may fall within the spirit and scope of the appended claims.